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RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND MEDICAL PRACTICES OF THE CREEK INDIANS

By JOHN R. SWANTON

GENERAL REMARKS

114 •771 The southern Indians, like other peoples, dealt not only with their environment as it was but with their environment as they conceived it to be, and one of the most important branches of ethnology is that which concerns this latter concept. Unfortunately, at the present day comparatively little may be gathered regarding their attitude on the broader aspects of belief that is free from suspicion of white influence, while on the other hand no early traveler among the Indians was sufficiently interested in them and sufficiently sympathetic to obtain and transmit a correct account of it. The writer who most nearly filled these requirements was the trader Adair so often quoted in previous papers, but unfortunately his assistance on this particular side of aboriginal life is seriously injured by a prepossession that the Indians were descendants of "the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel," and he read this prepossession into all of the religious activities of the people observed by him. Particularly he concluded that the meaningless vocalic sounds used by his red friends in songs were so many forms of the name Jehovah and that their repetition was a conscious or subconscious adoration of the Hebrew deity. Nevertheless he was an acute and honest observer and faithful recorder of the things he actually heard and saw, so that it is usually possible to separate the facts from his deductions. With his help, the little that is furnished us by other writers, the information that I have myself been able to collect, and that obtainable from native myths and legends, the following outline of Creek religious beliefs has been put together.

THE COSMOS

772 Like all other primitive peoples, the southeastern Indians conceived of the earth as a flat plane overarched by a solid vault. To General Hitchcock Tukabahchee miko expressed the opinion that the world is square. Eakins, whose information comes principally from an Alabama Indian, says "they generally entertain the belief that the earth is a square figure, and entirely surrounded by water; and by going to the verge of the plain, they could step off."[1] And, in another

[1] Schoolcraft, Ind. Tribes, vol. i, p. 269.

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Elsewhere he states that "when in the woods, the Indians cut a small piece out of the lower part of the thighs of the deer they kill, length-ways and pretty deep. Among the great number of venison-hams they bring to our trading houses, I do not remember to have observed one without it."[96] Again "the Indian women always throw a small piece of the fattest of the meat into the fire when they are eating, and frequently before they begin to eat. Sometimes they view it with a pleasing attention, and pretend to draw omens from it. They firmly believe such a method to be a great means of producing temporal good things, and of averting those that are evil."[97] He was informed by those whites who had become used to living in the Indian manner "that the Indian men observe the daily sacrifice both at home, and in the woods, with new-killed venison; but that otherwise they decline it."[97]

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Of course most of these are merely taboos connected with the hunting of deer. Pope says on this point:

"The *Creeks* regularly make a Burnt Offering of what they conceive to be the most delicious Parts of every Animal taken in Hunting, before they presume to taste a Mouthful. The Parts they commit to the Flames are proportioned to the Size of the Animal, probably about 2 or 3 lb. from a *Buffalo*, and still less in a regular gradation down to the smallest Quadrupede, Fish or Bird."[98]

I have no confirmation or contradiction of the gradations of sacrifice here mentioned, but it is well known even to the living Indians that the old people used to put a little food into the fire before eating. The same thing is noticed in Adair's account of the Creek who railed upon the fire for burning him after the good treatment he had given it.[99] One of my informants had seen the Nuyaka Indians "feed the fire" with turkey during their fall festivities accompanied by hunting and ball games.

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TABOOS

The religion of these people, and, as we shall presently see, their medicine, was seamed through and through with the idea that similarity in appearance means similarity in nature, that similarity in one property involves similarity in all the other properties, and that association of any kind will result in communicating properties from one thing or person to another. This is particularly true about things which are taken into the system by eating and drinking, but applies in other ways as well. Adair says on this point:

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"They believe that nature is possest of such a property, as to transfuse into men and animals the qualities, either of the food they use, or of those objects that are presented to their senses; he who

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[96] Adair, Hist. Am. Inds., pp. 137–138.
[97] Ibid., p. 115.
[98] Pope, Tour, p. 50.
[99] See p. 494.

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Methods of Practice

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The method of bestowing medical treatment seems to have changed progressively after first contact with the whites, the religious features becoming less and less pronounced and the features connected with the administration of the medicine more and more important. Adair's account of the performance among the Chickasaw in the middle of the eighteenth century is as follows:

"When the Indian physicians visit their supposed irreligious patients, they approach them in a bending posture, with their rattling calabash, preferring that sort to the North-American gourds: and in that bent posture of body, they run two or three times round the sick person, contrary to the course of the sun, invoking God as already exprest. Then they invoke the raven; and mimic his croaking voice . . . They also place a bason of cold water with some pebbles in it on the ground, near the patient, then they invoke the fish, because of its cool element, to cool the heat of the fever. Again, they invoke the eagle, (*Ooóle*) they solicit him as he soars in the heavens, to bring down refreshing things for their sick, and not to delay them, as he can dart down upon the wing, quick as a flash of lightning. They are so tedious on this subject, that it would be a task to repeat it: however, it may be needful to observe, that they chuse the eagle because of its supposed communicative virtues; and that it is according to its Indian name, a cherubimical emblem, and the king of birds, of prodigious strength, swiftness of wing, majestic stature, and loving its young ones so tenderly, as to carry them on its back, and teach them to fly."[93]

Of the Chickasaw of a later date we read:

"When they are sick, they send for a doctor, (they have several among them,) after looking at the sick a-while, the family leave him and the sick alone. He then commences singing and shaking a gourd over the patient. This is done, not to cure, but to find out what is the matter or disease: as the doctor sings several songs, he watches closely the patient, and finds out which song pleased: then he determines what the disease is: he then uses herbs, roots, steaming, and conjuring: the doctor frequently recommends to have a large feast: (which they call *Tonsh-pa-shoo-phah;*) if the Indian is tolerably well off, and is sick for two or three weeks, they may have two or three Tonsh-pa-shoo-phahs."[94] They eat, dance, and sing at a great rate,

[93] Adair, Hist. Am. Inds., pp. 173–174.

[94] Tonsh-pa-shoo-phah is tanshi ai pishofa, "the corn is hulled."

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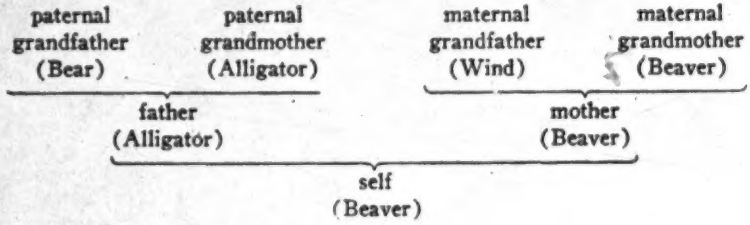
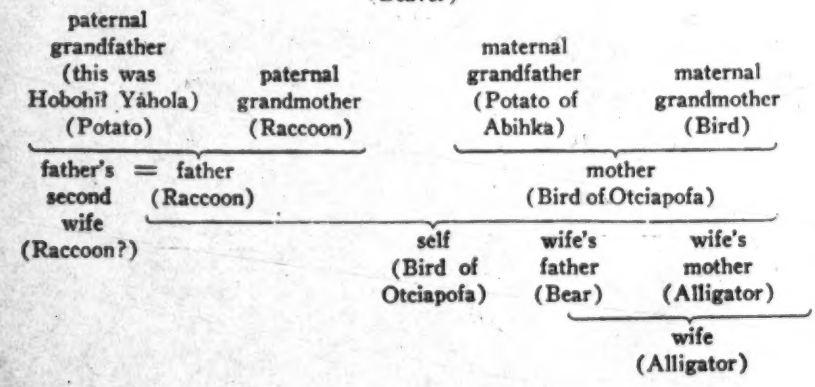
GENEALOGIES

The two brief genealogies which follow will illustrate in some measure the influence of the clan system on marriage. The first is the genealogy of Jeff Canard of Łapłáko; the second that of Earnest Gouge of Hanna, the latter of especial interest because it includes the famous orator Hobohīł Yáhola.





CONCLUSION

The busk undoubtedly represents a long period of development, and as the stages through which it passed and the elements entering into it have been lost, we can never understand it fully. Its main purpose, however, was evident. It was to restore the connections of the tribe with the universe which a year of civil or profane living had tended to rupture. Hence the new fire, extracted from its abiding place in the wood and not as yet sullied by contact with humanity. Hence the rigorous fast accompanied by administration of medicines divinely revealed to the ancestors, the general pardon of offenders, the sabbath calm prescribed for that period of regeneration, the use of white paint, and the employment of the term white—"the white day," "the white smoke," "the white drink"—in various parts of the ritual. The one discordant note seems to have been provided by the women's dance, since the leaders

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of that dance carried representations of war clubs, which there is every reason to believe were anciently adorned with scalps, and some of these were painted red. But I suspect that this dance was an attempt to represent war as a protective institution and to thank the being or beings who preside over human destiny for having so well defended them against assaults of the—as usual—perfidious foe. Possibly some element of propitiation also entered into this dance.

The universe with which the Creeks sought reconciliation was not, however, a material one. What they had in mind was rather the mind or minds believed to be operant there. While we know of some supernatural beings connected primarily with the busk and numerous spirits associated with natural objects were anciently believed in, it seems fairly certain that the peculiar patron of the ceremony was a solar, or rather celestial, being generally called Hisagita-immisi, "the breath controller," and also Ibofanga, "the one above," and that the busk fire was in some way an earthly representation of the great solar fire overhead. While it is probable that Hisagita-immisi was not in ancient times the monotheistic deity he has now become, there is every reason to think he was already, before White contact, the supreme being of the Creeks.